

LIBRARY WORK WITH THE BLIND

Alison B. Alessios

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WILSON LIBRARY BULLETIN

Library Work with the Blind

*By Alison B. Alessios **

WHAT do you see when you look at a page of Braille type? The same probably, as the average person sees—a collection of dots and hollows, totally unrevealing. Yet to many of the blind, those dots represent their contact with knowledge, their pathway through the obscurity of blindness. Even the hollows mark an advance in publishing; they are there because a way was found to emboss the dots on both sides of the paper, instead of one side only. They tell a vivid story of struggle, frustration, persistence, and final triumph on the part of the blind and educators of the blind, beginning in 1780 with Valentin Haüy of Paris. His imagination and enthusiasm had been captured by the accomplishments of a blind woman organist and composer, who gave notable performances in Paris. Once thoroughly aroused, his generous interest did not fail until he had established the first school for the blind and had succeeded in printing books in relief, using an adaptation of the Roman letter.

His success inspired philanthropists and teachers throughout the world, and schools were established in many countries. The deeply felt interest in the plight of the blind had needed only a spark to light it, and from then on various types were originated, used with more or less success, and discarded when superseded by something better. One of the most interesting of these, a type still in limited use, was the Moon system, invented

by Dr. William Moon, an Englishman. For the most part, he used roman capitals in raised outline, together with certain symbols arbitrarily devised. Several periodicals in this type are still published, and a few books continue to be produced.

But the great gift of a type which eventually overcame practically all possible objections, was to come from a blind man, Louis Braille, the son of a harness maker. As a child, he had played in his father's shop, and one day chose an awl as a plaything: through some accident he fell with the awl in his hand. It blinded him, and when he was ten years old, he was sent to the Paris School for the Blind. In that same year a young engineer and cavalry officer, interested in military signal codes, invented a system of cells which Louis Braille was to develop brilliantly, finally evolving the two-wide and three-high cell of dots from which has come Braille embossing as we now know it. Musical, mathematical, chemical codes have been worked out; codes in nearly all foreign languages, including Chinese, which, using a much simplified group of ideographs, have made it possible to teach Braille anywhere in China, regardless of the complications of dialects and localities.

Meanwhile the first school in America had been established in 1832 at St. Louis, but it was to be twenty years more before the first congressional appropriation was made. Braille was not immediately established in America, but various types were used, including Moon

* Retired; formerly Branch Librarian, Library for the Blind, New York Public Library.

and New York Point, the latter of which was to be entirely superseded in the course of time. When Braille did come to America, it was adopted by the St. Louis school, and when later on controversies began to rage about the various types, the school was able to point to the astonishing reading facility of its pupils, and thus help to influence the general adoption of Braille and the abandonment of such types as New York Point—an extremely clever, even scientific system which is still spoken of affectionately by older readers. It was by no means the only system to be used and discarded, but it made the strongest struggle for existence.

In May 1892, a Braille typewriter was invented by Frank H. Hall of the Illinois School for the Blind, which could make five or six strokes each second: it had six keys, one for each stroke of the Braille cell, and any one of the sixty-three characters could be made at a stroke by using the proper keys. Braille done without the machine is a laborious process, requiring a "slate" and stylus. Working from right to left, each letter and sign is made with the stylus, and when the work is completed and the paper removed from the slate and reversed, the dots may be read in their proper order.

With Mr. Hall's strong support, Braille won its way gradually in America, but not so steadily as in England, where three grades of Braille were devised: grade one, with full spelling of words; grade two, with a fairly large number of contractions; and grade three, with many contractions and of great interest to students. In 1905 the Uniform Type Committee was formed, which tested many readers and reported that the British stood highest, but American schools were not yet ready to accept the English Braille. However in 1917 a compromise was reached by which a part of grade two was adopted; this was called grade one-and-one-half. The British maintained that this new grade added seven minutes to every hour of writing time and more than ten per cent more lines, and they refused to read the American books produced in that type. English books were bought, and American readers learned the British system; in 1922 a key to grade two was published in the United States, and this gave impetus to the study. American readers quickly realized the advantages of grade two, and noted the waste attached to the more cumbersome system, grade one-and-one-half.

In 1923 an important event occurred. The American Association of Workers for the



Blind, which had been instrumental in forming the Uniform Type Committee, designated the recently formed American Foundation for the Blind to carry on the work of the committee. When Robert B. Irwin became executive director of the foundation, he took up the cause of standardization. He procured the adoption in America of the standard size page and of two-side printing, and cooperated with the American Braille Press in Paris and with other European authorities to standardize the music code. Realizing the progress being made in America with grade two, he directed the compilation of a mass of data which was later to be used very effectively in the cause of standardization. In 1932 a conference of representatives of America and England met in London and adopted a form of British Braille called Standard English Braille; this is now used in all English-speaking countries. At once, printing houses and other organizations accepted the handbook which outlined the new standard, and thus after almost a century of experimentation and rejecting, Braille was finally established.

In the same year, the development of another of Mr. Irwin's ideas was completed—the recording of books, or, as they began at once to be called, Talking Books. A laboratory at the foundation had worked out the problems of unbreakable disks, long-playing records, and a machine on which the records could be played and which could be operated by the blind. The Library of Congress had been designated as the agency in charge of this project, to supply the twenty-seven distributing libraries (there are now twenty-six) with talking books as well as those in Braille and Moon type as it had been doing.

Until the Library of Congress assumed the responsibility, libraries for the blind had been established locally as need seemed to arise; each did its work in its own way, caring

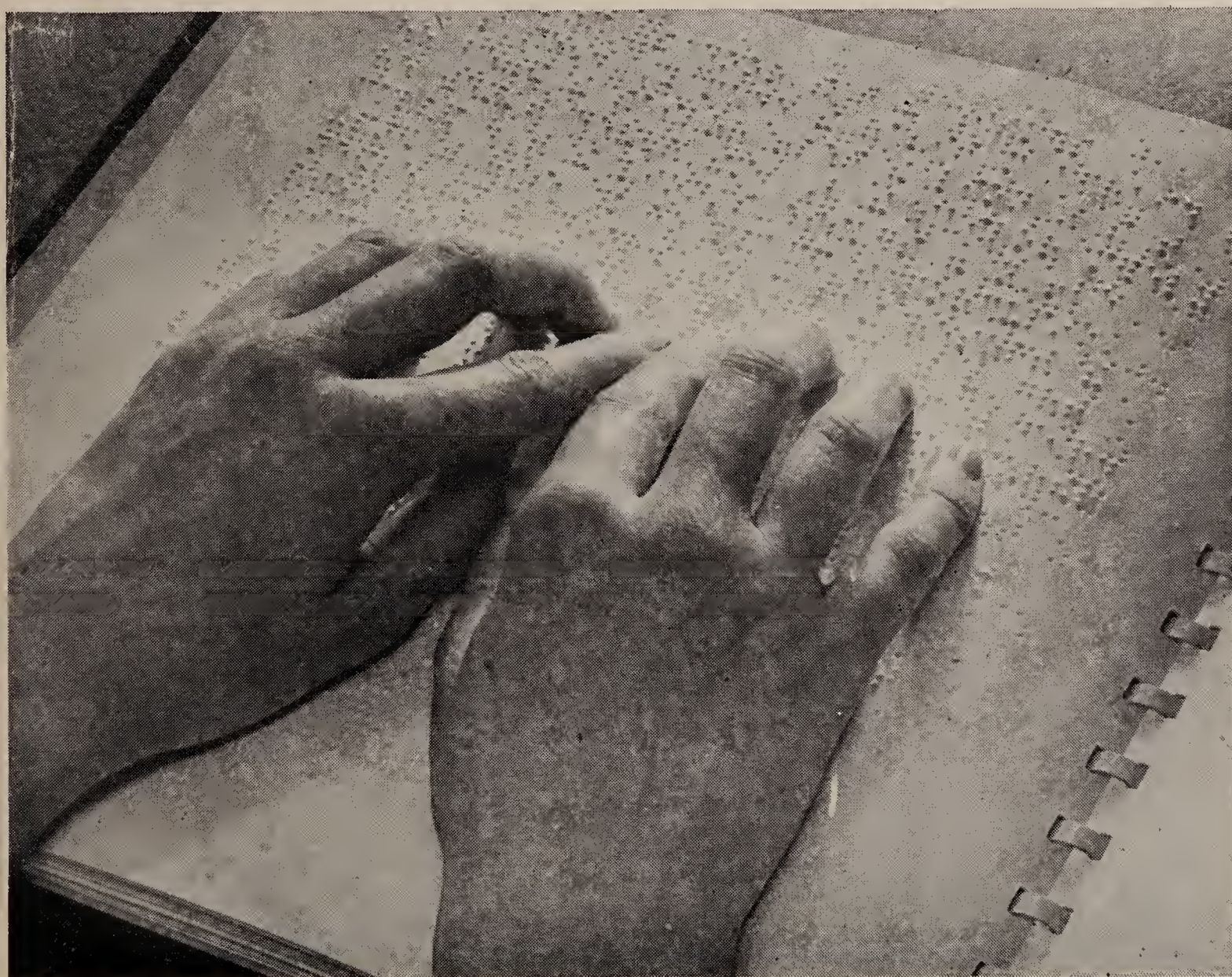
mainly for its own community; there was duplication, no attempt at uniformity, and little effort to cooperate with other libraries, except that the New York Public Library had built up a large collection of Braille music, which was made available to any blind reader.

With the designation of the Library of Congress as the central agency, definite geographical districts were assigned to each distributing library, and uniform collections of books paid for by funds appropriated each year by the Congress, were sent to each. The free mailing service, which had been provided in 1904, was extended to the talking book and permitted a great expansion of the work, and the immediate popularity of the talking book made much broader service available to all, especially as the Library of Congress undertook to provide free machines for all unable to pay the sum which was asked for these. To the first appropriation in 1935 for the talking book, the Congress added in 1935 an increase of \$100,000, making the total \$175,000.

Such are the tools of library work with the blind, one half of the two essentials that make library work everywhere; the other half being, of course, the people who will use what the library provides.

Of what does this provision consist? The old idea about the blind was that they preferred, and indeed needed, chiefly religious reading and books with an "uplift." Nothing could be further from the truth, generally speaking. The question asked most frequently by those making their first acquaintance with the library for the blind is, "What do the blind read?" The correct answer, of course, has always been, "That depends upon what sort of people they are: they have exactly the same sort of tastes as the sighted." This reply is often received with polite skepticism, but it is the only true one; a person losing his sight does not thereby lose his individual qualities. In the earlier days, when little was provided for them, the blind may have read and even reread "uplift" books, but, in many cases, what else was there for them to read? At least it kept their tactile reading ability from atrophy! ✓

Incredibly banal books have at times been laboriously transcribed into Braille, and have had some circulation, but when better books were provided, those were read. Today a blind reader may and does read the most popular best sellers as well as the old solid fare that has been enjoyed by readers for years. This is especially true of the talking



book. Reading a long, serious novel in Braille requires many more hours than the same novel would require if listened to. Opinion on such books as *War and Peace* is divided, some readers maintaining that it is as tiring to listen for long periods as it is to do the tactile reading, but they admit that more factors enter into reading by touch. Dust, perspiration, callouses, all slow up the fingers: the talking book requires only an attentive ear. Many readers knit or sew as they listen (yes, the blind can sew), some even prepare meals or wash dishes. This kind of listening will be still more popular now that a semi-permanent needle can be used on the talking book machine, thus eliminating the frequent changing of needles.

In the case of an individual who has lost his sight in later life, Braille is often an accomplishment beyond the reach. Many such readers never learn to read or write Braille, or, if they do acquire a knowledge of it, they usually reserve it for note-taking or personal correspondence.

How are the books chosen by the Library of Congress? Under the present system a list of possible titles is sent at intervals to each librarian, and she is asked to indicate which in her opinion are to be recommended, and in what medium she would have them produced. This sounds simpler than it actually is. In the first place, most librarians for the blind find themselves in the position of being cut off from inkprint books to a certain extent, and if they depend upon reviews, they will find that errors of judgment are fatally easy to make; it is not that the reviews are misleading, but quite understandably, they are not written with the requirements of blind readers in mind. A librarian recommending a title to be embossed in Braille, might do so because the book was recommended as good general reading, but if it happens to have been written with consider-

able dialect, the chances of Braille readers enjoying it are definitely lessened.

When she is recommending a book for hand transcribing by the volunteer groups working for the Library of Congress, she needs to remember that these books should in general be such as will be usable by many readers, and that the hand copied books are in nearly all cases heavier than the press-Brailled books and run into more volumes. There is also the question of duplication, of avoiding titles that may have been done elsewhere.

In the case of the talking book, it must be born in mind that this is the most expensive medium, and that consideration should be given to its qualities as general reading and to its lasting value.

What does all this add up to? To the fact that the librarian for the blind cannot afford to scamp her reading time; she *must* read more than ever if she is to give intelligent service, for the recommendations to the Library of Congress are only one test of her book knowledge and judgment. How many copies of any given book does her public need? Too few are worse than too many in some cases. She may be asked to serve on committees which make suggestions to the Library of Congress, which uses these as a basis for the lists sent to the librarians. She will, if she is working closely with her public, be asked for help in choosing reading lists; she will need to be able to discuss the features of a book which are open to criticism. For it cannot be said too often—blind readers *read* and *think*.

There are several printing houses in various parts of the country which print embossed books for the Library of Congress, the titles finally chosen for the distributing libraries; and two, the American Foundation for the Blind and the American Printing House for the Blind, which record the talking books. Readers doing this recording are as a rule professionals, highly trained and tested, which places the talking book on a high level of value as reading, either for recreation or for more serious purposes. Books are sent directly to the libraries from the publishing houses, hence libraries usually do their own accessioning and shelf-listing, which adds considerably to their routine work. On the talking book two periodicals are provided: the *Readers' Digest* and the *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. It was proposed at one time to discontinue the latter, which was originally intended to supply light





reading to convalescent war-blinded veterans, but so many readers asked for its continuance that it is still being supplied.

In Braille there are the *Readers' Digest*, the *Outlook for the Blind*, the *Braille Book Review*, and several others.

It is not generally realized how large an amount of routine work is necessary in handling a large volume of circulation at a library for the blind. In 1947, the New York Public Library for the Blind circulated a total of 72,000 volumes and containers (of talking books), the greater part of which was sent by mail to the readers. In ideal, or even in good circumstances, the number of volumes taken out personally by readers would be much larger than it is at present, but with an unfortunate, even hazardous location, and inadequate, crowded quarters, there is not enough incentive for the blind to come to the library. Regrettably, this appears to be the situation in most libraries for the blind.

Correspondence and telephone must take the place of personal visits for many of the blind; their letters and requests must be answered promptly and individually, and their telephone calls be given the necessary time and attention. Both of these activities are time-consuming, though indispensable, for these means of communication, if handled in a true spirit of service, will bring to the blind in a great measure the warmth of personal interest and understanding which make the difference between perfunctory attention and animate giving.

Another time-consuming, unavoidable piece of work is the daily revision of all containers of talking books returned in the day's mail. Each of these must be checked for number and condition of records, for orderly arrangement of records, for condition of containers, and for the identity of both records and containers. Carelessness in this respect leads to confusion and error.

Registration of Braille readers is uncomplicated, but registration of talking book readers involves several procedures necessary to good service. Since the talking book machines are issued by various social service agencies designated by the Library of Congress, unless a reader can afford to buy his own, a record must be kept of these as issued, and in addition, the make and number of the machine must be noted, since there are still several types of machines in use. In cooperation with the American Foundation for the Blind, a report of this record is sent that agency, in order that each reader may be listed to receive *Talking Book Topics*, a quarterly booklet which lists and gives information about all new talking book titles. In the absence of sufficient catalogs, it is of great importance to the readers to have something on which to base a choice of reading matter, and to be kept informed of the names of the persons doing the recording: tastes differ decidedly as to the merits of one recorder over another.

It will be seen from these statements that library work for the blind can hardly be considered to have reached a state of perfection, notwithstanding the fact that the Congress appropriates large amounts each year for the work. The states are taking a minor part in library work for the blind, the cities are doing little better, less well, in fact, than for libraries in general. Support from both these sources might be much more generous.

There are ways of augmenting the allotments of the Library of Congress. One lies in using the volunteer work of qualified transcribers, such as Red Cross groups, and individuals who have acquired the ability to write Braille. Each year every library receives as gifts from these sources many volumes which have been transcribed and, in most cases, bound without cost to the library. Such services are of much value, and the thoughtful, prepared librarian can acquire very useful material by this means. On the other hand if these groups lack competent assistance in the choice of titles to be transcribed, hours of patient labor may be wasted in duplication, or in transcribing outdated, valueless material. These transcribers are eager to be of service, and will as a rule do brief current reference material as well as entire books. One library used, in numerous emergencies, the services of a blind proofreader employed by the library, to whom a volunteer sighted person read the needed material, and who, by using the Braille typewriter recently per-

fectured by the American Foundation for the Blind, was able quickly to make the work available to the reader. One such piece of work was a set of intelligence tests for a blind supervisor working with deaf-blind young men; another was an economic syllabus for a blind student at college; both were urgently needed at short notice.

At the library for the blind in New York, there was organized in 1947 a new recording service for blind students. The work was begun originally in behalf of war-blinded veterans who were attending college, but the service was extended to all blind students or other persons in need of it. The recording was done on the Soundsciber, a recording machine that also plays back the recorded material; these machines were supplied to war-blinded veterans for use in the classroom. We obtained volunteer readers, borrowed a Soundsciber, and began recording; seven-inch vinylite disks were used, each side of which takes fifteen minutes to read or record. The first disks used were also borrowed, as there was no money at all for the purpose. Soon, however, we had acquired a Soundsciber as a gift from an interested member of the public, received a gift of enough disks to return the borrowed ones and to continue. From then on, we had as much work as we could handle in the cramped and limited quarters at our disposal. We had decided to

record only textbooks required for college classes, and received requests for Woodworth's *Psychology*, Schaefer's *From Beowulf to Thomas Hardy*, Menninger's *Human Mind*, Boyd's *Text Book of Pathology*, to mention only a few, and in addition all of the *Great Books* material not already available. Within a year we were able to purchase four Soundscibers from gifts made by the public, and had completed a total of more than 3,000 records.

We recorded also such material as a compilation of articles on the latest treatment of gout, selected by the library of the Academy of Medicine; the recording was done by a qualified volunteer, a medical student. Another special task was the recording of the examination questions for radio operator's license; another was a manual of piano-tuning for a war-blinded veteran. The recorder tore his hair over this one—it was a formidable piece of work, in its way as bad as Boyd's *Pathology*, which ranks highest in difficulty. In doing this work, the publisher's permission is always asked for recording or transcribing, and the cooperation of publishers has been inspiring and heartening.

When permission was asked for the Boyd book, we received a reply indicating doubts that such a book would be of service to the blind, and requesting further information. It was a pleasure to write and give this: the



three students who were to use the text are preparing to become chiropractors; one was a young man who had been doing his premedical work before he went into the Army, where he lost his sight; a second had been blind all his life; and the third had lost his sight as the result of an accident. We were able to vouch for the character and ability of all three, and permission to record the book was quickly forthcoming. The recording was done by an employee of one of the hospitals, and is a very good job. This sort of help for blind students could be begun in any library with community support; volunteers would surely be found, and public support can be counted upon.

Any account of library work with the blind would be incomplete without information about work with blind children, for this is the least satisfactory aspect of library service to the blind. The Library of Congress has necessarily confined its attention to books for adults, and in consequence books for children are issued by the publishing houses as their managers feel that there will be a profit commercially; the American Foundation for the Blind has done some work on this project; but the total result is still unsatisfactory from a library point of view. A certain amount of supplementary reading for schools is issued in Braille, together with some of the children's classics and "popular" titles, while there are available on the talking book a limited number of titles, such as Lang's *Blue Fairy Book*, Sawyer's *Roller Skates*, Seredy's *Good Master*, and similar titles. *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* have been recorded for the Library of Congress and are in the adult collections, as is *Alice in Wonderland*; *Little Men* and *Little Women*, and Andersen's *Fairy Tales* may be had, but not all of these are obtainable by every library because of the fact that talking books are often very expensive; the *Blue Fairy Book* costs \$25. It must also be taken into consideration that talking book machines are not supplied to children, and families are frequently unable to afford the expense of buying one. In some cases the recordings are good, in others they do not approach the work of trained library storytellers. What is needed is a program for children's reading in which all of the recording would be done by trained storytellers: Mother Goose, the best fairy tales and folklore, and all the great basic books so readily obtainable by sighted children should be the blind child's portion also. Something can be done by story hours, by visits to the library of

classes of blind children whose teachers are usually happy to bring them, and by visits of storytellers to schools or homes for the blind.

Recorded books would add infinitely to the resources of the blind child, taking him to fresh worlds, giving him a new independence, training his ear by good diction, and educating his taste and feeling. Recordings are sometimes opposed by educators on the ground that they distract a child's attention from his Braille studies, but is this claim any more valid than that which says of the sighted child that if he is permitted to listen to storytelling he will not read for himself?

I have given a sketch of library work for the blind as it is; now let me outline some of the features that might be added unto it. Because the background and mechanics of this work are different from work with the sighted, there should be more attention by library schools to this important field. So far as I know, no library school includes lectures on this work in its courses; if these were included they might not only attract to the work librarians with the special qualities of vision, understanding, and initiative needed for it, but also hasten the day of better opportunity for the blind.

Let us do away with cramped, unattractive quarters in undesirable locations; let us provide quiet places for study, booths and small rooms at least semi-soundproofed, where blind students may study their Braille or read their talking book, just as any sighted student seeking reference material might do. Blind people like discussions of current problems as much as sighted people do—does any library provide rooms or auditoriums for this purpose? Are concerts by blind musicians possible, or plays presented by blind actors? Are there lecture rooms, with planned programs? Does any club of blind people meet in the library? Have the blind participated in Great Books programs? When readers come to the library with reading problems, is there a quiet place, away from the telephone and other distractions, where help can be given? Is the library, in short, providing library service, or is it content with dispensing books?

The function of the public library in the education of the blind has not been fully understood; its performance depends upon the individual library. The Library of Congress can and does provide the foundation; each library must build for itself a living, growing structure. And if the means of growth are not at hand, *make* them.

Trends in Professional Education for Librarianship*

By Leon Carnovsky†

THERE has hardly been a time since the establishment of the first library school in 1887 when education for librarianship has not been subjected to a considerable degree of criticism, skepticism, and even downright censure. The criticisms have ranged from honest doubts as to its necessity at all to caustic comments on the products of the training agencies; though few of the critics have had the temerity to suggest that they could do it better, they are pretty sure there's something wrong somewhere, and anyway it was up to the schools to remedy their own defects.

What are these defects? For one thing, it is claimed that the programs have been too theoretical and not sufficiently related to the realities of library operations. The neophyte comes to his first library position full of enthusiasm, full of new-fangled ideas usually centered around such vague concepts as "the social role of the library," "the library as an agency of communication," and "adult education." Joseph Wheeler in his recent monograph lumps such ideas under the impressive heading *CONFUSION*.

On the other hand, some people have claimed that the schools didn't do nearly enough along so-called theoretical lines; that too much attention was paid to the niceties and details of techniques and to the indoctrination of the obvious, most of which could better be learned on the job anyhow, and too little time was devoted to the truly professional aspects of librarianship—again without much spelling out as to where the line between professional and nonprofessional should be drawn.

Another criticism that regularly springs up is that library school graduates are largely illiterate; they are not well read, they are not bookish in their tastes, they do not even know the names of key figures in literary history. And finally, the schools haven't done much about the larger pattern; they fail to turn out potential administrators or library planners

or persons with the imagination to solve such persistent problems as rural library service or international library relations.

I have cataloged these criticisms not to call them into question or to deny their importance, but rather to help us bear them in mind in assessing recent changes in the design of library education. We might as well recognize at once, however, that some of the criticisms are so sweeping that it is going to be extremely difficult if at all possible for the library schools to cope with them. What can the schools do, for example, to provide the book sense or literary background which college education has failed to provide? How can they prepare their students to solve problems of national or international magnitude when the teachers themselves don't know the answers—or, may I add, when wise and experienced librarians don't know the answers, either? And let us not forget that historically the library school came into existence in response to a demand for people who could run libraries, who could select books, organize them into a useable collection, and facilitate their use. Fundamentally, is not this still the primary reason for being of library training agencies?

Even so, no one would deny that a constant rethinking of school programs is good for the profession and healthy for the schools. In recent years this process has gone forward with redoubled vigor, and I shall try to indicate some of the changes which have already resulted and which are in prospect. One that has stirred up perhaps the greatest controversy among schools and librarians is the incorporation of part of the library education program in the traditional four-year undergraduate sequence. Does this mean anything more than the broadening of the Type III school, the type which requires less than four years of college study? Yes, a good deal more.

Let me begin by describing what is taking place at Chicago, because it represents a pattern which if successful will go far toward meeting many of the criticisms leveled against training agencies. We begin with admission.

* Part of a paper presented before the New Jersey Library Association at Princeton, November 26, 1948.

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 A LIBRARY WORK WITH THE BLIND.

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